

A HAT-TRICK by Ian Pearson and a brave display from Dulwich Hamlet brought a thrilling finish to Wycombe Wanderers' season at Loakes Park on Saturday. And although there were groans of disappointment when the Slough v Enfield result was announced, the 2,000 crowd must have gone home contented after a superb afternoon's entertainment.

So Wanderers finish just a point behind last year's winners Enfield, with Dagenham in third place — exactly the same top three positions as last year.

Wycombe Wanderers 3, Dulwich Hamlet 1 REPORT BY STUART EARP

Wycombe knew the runners up spot was secure when Dagenham lost at Tooting on Thursday but they had to win against Dulwich in case Enfield slipped up at Slough. Against a club second from the foot of the table, the task looked a formality. But as expected, Dulwich made the Blues fight tooth and nail for the win they wanted.

The Londoners, watched by manager John Reardon in mid-week, kept Wycombe fans waiting until mid-way through the second half before they could breathe easily. If Dulwich can keep this side together, they must

return to Division One at the first attempt.

There were two unexpected changes when Wanderers announced their team. John Maskell was out with an injured back after a car accident during the week while centre forward Howard Kettleborough was out of the running with a painful tooth abscess. Peter Spittle and Tony Horseman came in.

The absence of the two regulars and Alan Phillips certainly had its effect on Wycombe's performance for despite the excitement the Blues were never at their best in this last game. The

passing was distinctly poor at times and with Graham Mackenzie and Gavin Fraser having off days, the midfield area was surrendered to Dulwich.

Fortunately, the performances of the front runners and the back four made up for this deficiency while Mick Holfield enjoyed a tremendous game to ensure against total Dulwich domination in the middle. Keith Mead and Bob Davies worked wonders at the heart of the defence, even though Mead suffered a cut above the eye which needed half a dozen stitches afterwards.

FITTING TRIBUTE

Up front the combination of Pearson, Horseman and Dylan Evans looked sharp and incisive. Pearson it was who stole the thunder with three fine goals — a fitting tribute to his finishing power.

With both sides needing to win for contrasting reasons, entertainment was assured from the first whistle. Both sides were pledged to attack and there were some close shaves at both ends in a goalless first half. Paul Birdseye began the action after two early Dulwich corners when he overlapped onto Holfield's fine through ball and cracked in a shot which Alan Thomas did well to tip over.

By making themselves first to the ball, Dulwich were able to break quickly from midfield throwing two and sometimes three extra men forward. Winger Ossie Bayram, who has interested Millwall and Charlton this season, showed a clean pair of heels to more than one home defender and at times Wycombe were more than happy to thump the ball into touch or upfield out of danger.

Wanderers carved out a few chances, like Evans' diving header in the 31st minute, and after Bayram wasted Dulwich's best first half chance by driving wide with only Spittle to beat, the Blues finished the half with a fierce spell of pressure. Pearson twice went close and Wanderers forced five corners in the last eight minutes with Evans heading narrowly wide seconds before the half time whistle.

Goals just had to come in the second half and it took only 50 seconds for the Blues to break the deadlock. Referee Martin, who had a fine game, waved aside penalty appeals as Pearson was brought down in the side the box. The ball ran loose to Evans who bided his time before crossing to the far post where Dulwich had left Pearson unmarked. Ian made the most of their generosity by heading firmly into the net.

STRANDED

The fans' joy was shortlived however. Within two minutes Dulwich had forced their way back into the game when Davies allowed Bayram too much room and the winger sent over a long cross for Alex Jackson to head past the stranded Spittle.

Wycombe wilted after this shock set-back and allowed Dulwich to mount fierce pressure which almost brought another goal. Mead was only inches away from an own goal and Spittle saved bravely at Charlie Pooley's feet. This was Wanderers' worst spell of the match. They lost their composure and gave the ball away with some wretched midfield passing.

But to their credit, they weathered the storm and their spirit was exemplified when Mead returned after treatment for his cut eye. Within a couple of minutes, Wanderers were ahead again. Evans' shot was deflected into Horseman's path eight yards from goal. Thomas managed to parry Tony's rather weak drive but as the ball rolled towards the line with Thomas crawling back on all fours, Pearson raced in to thump a shot to the back of the net.

CROWD TROUBLE

By taking what seemed unnecessary chances at the back, Wycombe kept their supporters on tenterhooks for a while and Spittle did well to turn Bayram's awkward cross over the bar. At the other end Horseman drove straight at Thomas after Pearson and Mackenzie combined well and the tension seemed to spread to the crowd when small outbreaks of violence occurred on two occasions.

Wycombe's third goal eased any fears of a Dulwich comeback in the 74th minute. Holfield found Evans on the left. Spotting Pearson poised for a run on the far side, Dylan curled the ball around the defenders and into Pearson's path. Running on, Ian cracked home a superb goal to complete his hat-trick.

Brave Dulwich still came back with Pooley heading just over the top but they seemed to realise their chance of first division survival was lost and the last quarter was comfortably controlled by Wycombe.

At the final whistle the fans ran over to await the news from Slough. It wasn't the result they wanted to hear but their long applause for the Wycombe players summed up their appreciation.

WYCOMBE: P. Spittle; P. Birdseye, R. Davies, K. Mead, J. Priestley; G. Mackenzie, G. Fraser, M. Holfield; I. Pearson, A. Horseman, D. Evans. Sub S. Hill (not used).

DULWICH: A. Thomas; H. Faulkner, A. Dunkin, R. Brooke, S. Rogers; A. Hart, D. Barker, F. Pudney, A. Jackson, C. Pooley, O. Bayram. Sub E. Rhoden (not used).

Referee: J. Martin (Hants).

Half-time: 0-0. Goalscorer: Wycombe — Pearson 3 (48, 66, 74), Dulwich — Jackson (48). Attendance: 1,800.